'Twas a Long Battle Before Memphis Got Its Parks, New Book Reveals

By CLARK PORTEOUS, *Press-Scimitar Staff Writer*

The Memphis park system got started just about the time the 20th Century did.

Dr. William D. Miller, former Memphis State professor, now a professor of history at Marquette University, Milwaukee, on leave until next September, tells—among a variety of things about Memphis history—of the birth of the Memphis park system in his book, "Memphis During the Progressive Era 1900-1917."

Dr. Miller's book, now on sale at Memphis book stores for $4.50, published by the American History Research Center, Madison, Wis., and Memphis State University Press, was written from his Ph.D. dissertation. He obtained his doctor's degree from University of North Carolina.

Strong Advocates

Dr. Miller says the city election of 1898 brought into office a number of strong advocates of a modern park system, the most prominent of whom were Mayor Joe Williams and Councilmen Hu L. Brinkley and H. H. Litty, the latter destined to become mayor in 1917-18. Mayor Williams prepared a bill for the 1899 Legislature authorizing the city to issue bonds for purchase and condemnation of lands for parks and parkways and the election of a Board of Park Commissioners. The bill passed.

Williams named the first Park Commission, with Judge L. B. McFarland as chairman, Robert Galloway and John R. Godwin as members. The city council voted to issue bonds for $250,000 to finance the parks.

Memphis was visited by William Olmsted of Olmsted Brothers, Brookline, Mass., designers of New York's Central Park. He toured Memphis and vicinity on a bicycle, reported Memphis had grown so much and had been so remiss about planning it would be difficult to develop a satisfactory system of public squares and small neighborhood parks. He recommended essentially the basis of the future Memphis park system, with two large parks, one on the river south of the city and the other in eastern territory, with a system of parkway connections between them.

Lea's Estate

McFarland and his associates went to Nashville to discuss with Overton Lea acquisition of his east Memphis estate—Lea woods. In December 1900 the council authorized purchase of Lea's estate at $300 an acre. Miller says Lea objected to selling all his property, on grounds that a park would enhance the value and speculators would profit at his expense. He wanted to keep 162 of his 337 acres "so that he himself might enjoy greater profit from their later sale." His proposal was denied, and a compromise was reached and he was paid $327 an acre, up $27.

The council authorized purchase of 340 acres at $200 an acre, for Riverside Park, and was allocated an adjoining 70-acre tract by the County Court.

Naming the Lea tract was quite a problem, with such names as "The Oakes," "McKinley," "Schley National" and "Robert E. Lee" being discarded in favor of Overton Park in honor of Judge John Overton, one of the three founders of Memphis.

Start of the Zoo

Galloway became chairman and, in 1906, told the Park Commission if it would appropriate $1200 for a zoo, he would raise a fund to maintain it. The drive for funds started with a baseball game at Montgomery Park, now the Fairgrounds, between members of the Cotton Exchange and the Merchants Exchange.

In 1911, Galloway suggested Presidents Island as a good site for a negro park, saying the negro "ought to be in his glory among all that tropical growth." This was not taken seriously and the Park Commission, supported by Mayor E. H. Crump, proposed that the city buy 50 acres on Macon Road, several miles beyond the city's eastern limit, for a negro park. Galloway was then cruising in the Caribbean on his yacht. He came back and fought the proposition. He said the parks needed many other things first. The city commissioners finally voted with Galloway. In 1913, Douglass Park was acquired for negroes.

Dr. Miller did most of his research in newspapers, checking court records, city minute books, etc., and interviewing people to verify and get more information.

He tells how in this period, the Health Department came into its own, and how Mayor Williams put in a good sewer system. He tells of the growth of the city school system in the period, of improvement in streets, of improvement in the police and fire departments.

Williams was mayor from 1898 to 1906, and was defeated by Crump, who served until 1915.

Dr. Miller has a chapter on "Political Progressivism — the Mayoralty of E. H. Crump." It tells of Crump coming in on a

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reform movement, and of his fight to get public ownership of utilities, a fight that was not to be completed until the 1930s.

Wicked City

In a chapter titled "Sodom and Gomorrah," Dr. Miller gives evidence to the effect that Memphis was just about as wicked as the destroyed Biblical cities during the "Progressive" era.

He shows how the saloons were enmeshed in politics, tells of Councilman Crump proposing in 1906 to raise the tax on saloons from $60 a year to $250, and of Vice Mayor John T. Walsh quickly marshaling forces to defeat this.

Dr. Miller tells of dope addiction in the period, of the high rate of murder, with punishment for homicide being infrequent, except for negroes. The suicide rate was abnormally high. He tells of "Wild Bill" Latura, who entered a negro saloon in 1908 and said he was going to turn the place into a funeral parlor and, with no obvious reason, killed six customers. He was acquitted. In 1915, Latura, angry because a reporter called him "Wild Bill" in the paper, told a group of policemen he was going to "get" them and the reporter, and was shot five times by a policeman as he turned to walk away.

Deadly Raid

He tells of a gambling raid on De Soto Street, July 11, 1904, by five deputies, one of them a negro, Houston Mitchell. George Honan, George Deggs, Mike Haggerty and Harry Keene, underworld characters, after 40 men and women had been arrested and tied together, went in and disarmed and shot the deputies and freed the prisoners. Mitchell and a white deputy, Thomas J. McDermott, were fatally shot.

Only one of the men, Honan, was ever brought to trial, and he was defended by Rep. Malcolm R. Patterson, later governor, and acquitted by convincing the jury the affair had been brought on by the "insolence" of the negro deputy.

Dr. Miller tells how Crump played a leading part in the fight to get commission government on the ground that the city should be operated in the efficient manner of a business.

Again They Clash

Crump and Galloway clashed again, in the spring of 1913, when Mayor Crump blocked the Park Commission's proposal to buy Jackson Mound Park. Galloway suggested the commission tell Crump to "go to H—— and get a new commission." Galloway dared Crump to debate the issue publicly, saying he would pay for the theater and band and then "beat him up." Two years later, with Crump no longer opposing, Jackson Mound Park was bought and renamed De Soto Park.

Dr. Miller tells many fascinating stories that will jog the memories of many Memphians now living. This book, with quite a bit about Crump, will whet the appetite of many for the biography of Crump that Miller is now doing on a grant from the American History Research Center. He is a native of Florida, now lives at 1617 Cherry Road with his wife and six children. They will move to Milwaukee before next September. Dr. Miller did research for the book while teaching at Memphis State, where he started in the fall of 1948, starting on the research the spring of 1949.

Grim Story

Dr. Miller ends his book with a grim story of the mob burning of a half-witted negro at the Wolf River Bridge on Macon Road in May 1917. The negro was charged with having assaulted and decapitated a 16-year-old white girl. About 4000 persons and "fully 500 cars" were at the scene. The negro's heart was cut out of his body and the charred remains were dismembered. The head and leg were thrown among a group of negroes on Beale Street. A barber shop, seeking to attract customers, displayed a charred remnant.

And that was just a little more than 40 years ago.

The book ends with the sentence: "Memphis was still chasing devils in the easy way of the 'progressive' movement, blind to the devil in its own heart."